



THE PLAIN DEALER

ELECTION

Arts-funding issue gets a number

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Whether they're for it or against it, the voters of Cuyahoga County finally have a name to call the proposed cigarette-tax hike to benefit the arts that will appear on fall ballots.

It's Issue 18. Campaigners are hoping the number -- assigned later in the campaign season than usual by the Board of Elections -- will help them boost awareness of the measure, assisting their efforts to get it passed on Tuesday, Nov. 7.

But campaign leaders first have to win support of the arts community itself: Compared with the high-energy mobilization of the county arts and cultural sector for Issue 31, a property-tax increase for economic development including the arts that failed in 2004, turnout of the faithful for Issue 18 has been low.

When asked where the crowds were at a sparsely attended campaign meeting Friday, Tom Schorgl of the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture said grimly, "I don't know. I'm concerned because I'm not sure people understand the gravity of the situation."

Schorgl, whose arts-service organization has been leading the quest for public arts funding in Cleveland and the county, said that artists and cultural workers need to get involved in the campaign because, with only about eight weeks remaining until the election, "every day is an opportunity to make our message clear that [arts funding] is a public value."

The proposed levy would raise the tax on cigarette sales in the county by 1½ cents per cigarette or 30 cents per pack for 10 years, generating about \$20 million per year for artists, arts and cultural organizations and special cultural projects.

The money would be disbursed in county grants awarded to selected applicants through a rigorous peer-review process conducted by the recently created arts and cultural district that includes the entire county. The county's three commissioners make up the district's board.

Now that the issue has a number, "we are moving as absolutely fast as we can" to get yard signs and literature printed up, said State Sen. Eric Fingerhut, a Shaker Heights Democrat, who is campaign director.

To launch the final push to get the word out on Issue 18, the campaign will invite the arts and cultural community and other supporters to a noon lunch gathering Monday at Lakewood's Beck Center for the Arts to refocus its energies, Fingerhut said.

The campaign has raised about \$700,000 of its hoped-for budget of \$1.35 million, said campaign finance director Ray Sawyer.

The campaign will emphasize the jobs, the \$1.3 billion economic impact and educational benefits that the arts provide to the local community "as compared to the public value of tobacco," Schorgl said.

A spokesman for those opposing Issue 18 could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Issue 18 has been endorsed by Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, Cleveland City Council and council President Martin Sweeney and the First Suburbs Consortium.

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